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The Equality March

Introduction

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In this section of *InterAlia* we print three texts related to an important event for Polish queers: the Poznań Equality March of November 19, 2005. The first is a personal account by Błażej Warkocki, written right after he was released from jail along with some sixty other participants of the March.[1] The second is an analysis of the media representations of the March written by one of the organizers, Izabela Kowalczyk. Finally, we include a short note from the national daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* about a ruling by the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, which declared that the March had been legal while the efforts to ban the March were illegal.[2] As the events unfold, we will update this section of *InterAlia* by publishing reports and analyses.

In a country where fences pop up around housing estates like mushrooms after the rain, and where the number of "aliens," "Jews," "fags," and other undesirables seems to be constantly on the rise, it is all the more important to take note of the those who, by means of a leap of the imagination, spring over the fences to build coalitions. Meeting the Other half-way, questioning the basis of the Other's exclusion, demanding equal access to public space for oneself and Others are not new phenomena in Poland but they have acquired a new meaning in recent months in light of the appropriation of the public space by a nationalist, Catholic, and homophobic majority. For several years now, some feminists, lesbians, and gay men in Poland have been marching together in a variety of demonstrations and parades because they noticed that, to a certain extent, their aims overlap. Occasionally they are joined by concerned politicians, representatives of the world of art and culture, as well as accidental passers-by. Yet for me it is the Poznań Equality March of November 19, 2005 which most fully represents the coalition politics valorized by Douglas Crimp, one of the co-founders of the American queer movement.

Although in their everyday lives the marchers in this peaceful demonstration identify with a wide range of groups (including feminist and LGBT organizations, people with disabilities, the Green party, alterglobalists, or the Eighth Day Theater) when they walked out onto Półwiejska Street teeming with policemen and pseudo football fans, they did so with the awareness that if they got hit over the head with a truncheon or stone it would be as "fags." That winter afternoon they took on the risk of being "fags" because they decided that when the majority starts putting up fences to keep out

a group of queers there might soon be no room left for other minorities.

The lines of exclusion cut across Poland in a variety of places - usually along class lines, as in Bielsko-Biała, where the tenants of a modest apartment building in the center "object to the nuisance caused by the poor who visit the adjacent Bread Bank to get food. The tenants want to use their own money to put up a fence that would separate them from the bank."[3] In the same Easter issue of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* (15 April 2006) there is an article on the Kraków war between two groups of football fans - supporters of the rival teams Wisła and Cracovia.[4] Here the boundary between "us" and "them" is quite arbitrary: the fans of the two clubs are not differentiated by age, gender, social status, or even place of residence. "In other cities, whole districts root for one team; only in Kraków there is no rule: one street may support Wisła, and a neighboring one Cracovia. It might appear that the entire district of Kazimierz supports Cracovia yet Bohaterów Getta Square is its center is inhabited by Wisła fans. Those young men see each other daily, they ride the same trams, get off at the same stops." Yet "every day, a dozen or more people fall victim to the war." A Wisła fan aptly pinpoints the source of the conflict: "We haven't the slightest reason to like Cracovia. Otherwise Wisła fans wouldn't be Wisła fans." While sociologists might be able to explain why this particular group membership is so important today for the Kraków football fans, the fans themselves know full well that only by excluding "others" is a group able to define its own identity.

Alternately, a group may be defined by outsiders, like the participants of the Equality March. Izabela Kowalczyk points out that no matter how many times the organizers of the March reminded government officials and journalists that they represent many excluded minorities, the March was dubbed a "gay parade." It was as a "gay parade" that the march was branded by the clergy and then banned by the municipal authorities. Newspaper and TV journalists in search of sensational material insisted on calling it a "gay parade."

It was also as a "gay parade" that the March was ignored by Poznań consumers, who think of themselves as the normal majority. Yet if we give it some thought, the behavior of the Poznań shoppers was far from normal. "While the participants of the illegal Poznań Equality March, caught in a trap between two police cordons, were shouting 'YES to equality! YES to democracy! STOP homophobia!' in opposition to the thugs and pseudo football fans' infamous slogans 'Gas the fags! We'll do to you what Hitler did to the Jews!' ... the emotions in the street mounted. Gradually, the moment when the 'illegal crowd' would be dispersed by force' approached. Meanwhile, through the huge shopping mall window we watched

the male and female consumers - separated from us by a sidewalk and a pane of glass - trying on shoes and counting the money in their wallets, oblivious to the events unfolding outside."[5] This surreal scene demonstrates how an accidental set of people, separated from another set of people by a shop window, instantly constructed a group identity and a pattern of behavior appropriate for normal shoppers, which involved showing no interest in the exciting spectacle outside. Simultaneously, crowded between the police cordons, the marchers felt united as much by the physical proximity of other marchers who were by then frozen to the bone, as by their separation from the people inside the well-lighted store behind the glass.

It will be difficult to bring about cultural and political changes important for queer people unless we break through the shop window to the "normal consumers" and change the way they imagine their communities and the bonds that tie them to people outside their immediate family, neighborhood, or soap opera. A handful of the most determined gays and lesbians is definitely not going to succeed; but the history of the queer movement suggests that there is no better way to increase one's power of persuasion than to painstakingly build alliances with other non-normative groups.

Of the many strands of queer, the one I feel most committed to emerged from the need to build coalitions within the fragmented, identity-based American LGBT community of the late 1980s. Such a coalition became necessary to confront the AIDS epidemic. Previously, as Crimp points out, lesbian and gay activists assumed their movements had evolved around the non-normative identities of lesbians and gays. Contrary to this view, Crimp argues that LGBT organizations constructed their identities also by identifying with other political movements - the civil rights movement, Black nationalism, and feminism - and these, in turn, had looked for models to the Third World liberation movements.[6] Unfortunately, having learned from the experiences of those groups, the early gay and lesbian activists cut themselves off and focused on the struggle for their own rights. "It was our inability to form alliances with those movements' identifications with which we secured our own identities, as well as our inability to acknowledge those very same differences of race and gender within our own ranks, that caused the gay and lesbian movement to shift, on the one hand, to an essentialist separatism and, on the other, to a liberal politics of minority rights."Fear of a Queer Planet: Politics and Social Theory, r ed. Michael Warner, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, str. 314."

Learning from their mistakes, social organizations such as ACT UP and its successor Queer Nation encouraged queers to see their

identities as more relational, situational, and unconstrained by existing group identities based on race, class, or gender. With the gradual shift away from essentialist notions of identity there emerged working groups in which "a white, middle-class, HIV-negative lesbian might form an identification with a poor, black mother with AIDS, and through that identification might be inclined to work on pediatric health-care issues; or, outraged by attention to the needs of babies at the expense of the needs of the women who bear them, she might decide to fight against clinical trials whose sole purpose is to examine the effects of an antiviral drug on perinatal transmission and thus ignores the effects on the mother's body. She might form an identification with a gay male friend with AIDS and work for faster testing of new treatments for opportunistic infections, but then, through her understanding that her friend would be able to afford such treatments while others would not, she might shift her attention to health-care access issues."[8]

After years of observing coalition politics based on relationally constructed identities Crimp is aware that we remain, after all, attached to the idea of stable, organic identity, and we often allow old antagonisms to resurface. (Standing in Półwiejska Street severed by two police cordons, it was easy to give in to thinking in terms of us/them, homo/hetero, no matter which side we happened to be on.) Nonetheless, Crimp's historical perspective on the queer movement offers hope that in the face of a crisis, like the crisis of the civil society in Poland, we may start pushing our imaginations harder, asking what connects us to other social groups, and taking joint responsibility for the well-being of those groups. Perhaps more gay men will march with feminists to protest the closing of state-owned kindergartens? Perhaps feminist academics will lend an ear to the alterglobalists' slogans? Perhaps the physically-able members of all these groups will support an initiative introduced by people with disabilities? Perhaps, by a stretch of the imagination, consumers will take a closer look through shop windows at what is going on out in the street?

The Equality March *is* moving on. A week after the Poznań events, solidarity rallies were staged in Elbląg, Katowice, Krakow, Łódź, Rzeszow, Toruń, Warsaw and Wrocław, as well in Berlin, Budapest, London, and Vienna. The annual March of Tolerance did take place in Kraków on April 28, 2006, despite the brutal counterdemonstration. The June Equality Parade in Warsaw is still ahead. Who will be a fag on that day?

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[1] Błażej Warkocki,

[2] "Koniec wątpliwości: zakazy manifestacji gejów i lesbijek

niezgodne z prawem", i

[3] Marcin Czyżewski, " Mieszkańcy kamienicy odgrodzą się od biednych", i

[4] Paweł Smoleński, "Mordercza wojna na stadionach", i

[5] Katarzyna Bratkowska, Anna Laszuk i Julia Kubisa, "Faszyzacja i obojętność. Marsz zza szyby (centrum handlowego)", tekst cytowany przez Izabelę Kowalczyk w niniejszym nmerze.

[6] This view is also confirmed by Martin Duberman in i

[7] Douglas Crimp, "'Right On, Girlfriend!' i

[8] Ibid., str. 316-317.

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